Out of the Blue and into the Black: There's More to Reading Than Meets the Eye

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An increase in the use of reading activities in the language-learning classroom can be justified when we have a clear set of reasons underpinning our choice. Most coursebooks view reading as a springboard for other activities rather than for the skill and enjoyment of reading itself. Reading provides a rich source of vocabulary and structure, which are naturally recycled and, therefore, help to build automaticity/fluency. Although reading requires more time than is sometimes allowed for in "eclectic" syllabi, it furnishes an input or exposure to the language, much in the mode of "comprehensible input + 1" (Krashen 1985) or Piaget's notion of "disequilibrium" (Piaget 1985). Furthermore, reading is a means of self-directed, autonomous study enabling students to continue "working with" the language long after their period of study has ended. Research also suggests that there is a link between good readers and good writers: there is a discernible run-on effect (Stotsky 1983).

Vocabulary is cited by many researchers as a critical component of reading comprehension, and yet there is a large disparity between the vocabulary range of native speakers and EFL/ESL students. For example, American graduate students have a receptive vocabulary in the range of 60,000 to 100,000 words. However, ESL students entering American universities need only have a receptive vocabulary of between 6,000 and 7,500 words (Aitchison 1987). As students become more advanced, their "new" vocabulary consists of mainly lower frequency words. Therefore, there are fewer opportunities for exposure to, and use of, these. Reading, re-reading, and reviewing can provide this opportunity.

In this light it seems logical to make reading a more important feature of language courses, bearing in mind that much of the work can be done outside the classroom and use can be made of various techniques other than question-and-answer as a means of vocabulary enrichment.

The First Step: Sources

The initial step is to consider sources of reading material. These are many and varied: short stories, novels, graded readers, song lyrics, magazine and newspaper articles, instruction manuals, advertisements, jokes, comics, and, of course, textbooks. Broadly speaking, these can be broken down into two main areas: books (extended reading) and passages (from various sources). Both of these can be seen to have advantages and disadvantages. Examples (the result of group work at a recent teachers' workshop) are shown on the next page.

There is a lot of overlap between the pros and cons of both groups/types of reading materials. This list is by no means exhaustive. But the ideas suggested do pose realistic choices that have to be made in the process of increasing the role of reading as a source of vocabulary enrichment.

Vocabulary: Choice, Meaning, Use

The next stage is to consider vocabulary in relation to choice, meaning, and use. The first step is to RECOGNISE a word that is to be explored. Students will encounter many new lexical items, and when they come across a new word they may react in several different ways, from attempting to guess to simply ignoring it. However, if a systematic approach is to be adopted, the word chosen will depend on the criteria the teacher and/or students have for extending vocabulary. The choice may come from the teacher, from negotiation between the teacher and the students, from the students as a group, or from the students as individuals. Secondly, it is vital that MEANING is made clear: either by asking someone or by using a dictionary or by guessing from the contextual/linguistic clues or by translating. Nevertheless, meaning often goes beyond a simple explanation in the sense that words have "boundaries" of meaning that need to be recognised. Words such as *scratch, graze, cut,* and *gash* all have a similar meaning, yet you cannot graze yourself with a knife and you are unlikely to scratch yourself with a piece of broken glass. The idea is that students have to understand where each of these words "begin" and "end" in order to be able to say that they understand the word, i.e., they will have to recognise the boundaries of meaning of each. Thirdly, the vocabulary item must be USED and/or recycled to aid retention or to make that particular item part of the students' productive vocabulary.

One way of achieving this vital third step was recently featured in the TESOL Journal (The Frontier Method, by Carroll and Mordaunt, 1991). The idea is simple. The students themselves choose new or semi-familiar words from texts they are reading which they identify as being of some use to them now or in the near future. On a 3" x 5" card they note the information the dictionary gives them (including phonetic information), the source of the item, the original sentence in which the item occurred, and a new sentence written by themselves to provide a parallel context. These cards can be checked by the teacher at regular intervals and returned to the student. Further follow-up work involves a piece of extended writing making use of some of the items dealt with in this manner. The advantages of this technique are: it addresses the students' own vocabulary needs in a way that is at the same time learner-generated and systematic; the words are learnt within a meaningful context with the additional benefit of practicing the study skill of using a dictionary as a learning aid; and the technique is inherently adaptable to various learning situations.

Another way to handle the threefold consideration of choice, meaning, and use is through the development of glossaries. The procedure can be refined in various ways, but it is essential that the students work together towards a common goal, recognising as valuable the concept of cooperative learning. The students choose the words and work on finding definitions and examples of usage in groups. The end result is a handout containing the student-generated, student-defined, student-contextualised items of vocabulary that the students deemed necessary to work on from that particular text. A further advantage of this approach is that the level of cooperation can extend beyond one class by sharing glossaries among classes.

Other Ways to Develop Vocabulary

There are many other techniques for promoting vocabulary development through the medium of reading. One successful technique is to use a character's name as an acronym. The students then supply an item beginning with each letter of the name to represent their interpretation of that character's personality or main attributes. A further extension of the idea of using an acronym is for the students to write their own chapter heading and use this for the principal events of a particular chapter or section of a text. Activities such as these may be developed through various discussion-building techniques, which serve to reinforce the meaning and use of the student-generated vocabulary. These activities are very flexible in relation to the choice element of vocabulary enrichment. In comparison, a more controlled activity is one where the students are required to match given adjectives against a list of characters. A further variation of a matching exercise is to provide two groups of items, one containing adjectives and the other containing nouns. These two groups are the result of splitting descriptive adjective/ noun pairings from a text. The students may not be able to exactly re-create the original text pairings, but any combination can be validated by the students if they can provide their own context and/or imagery.

Activities similar to these and others are explained in more detail in Greenwood 1989 and Collie and Slater 1987.

Conclusion

The range of activities discussed and exemplified provides an opportunity for any teacher, who may feel discouraged at the thought of devoting more time to reading texts, to deal effectively with extended reading. Being able to use techniques other than "question and answer" allows teachers to make reading a more important feature of their classes-the main point being that reading as a means of vocabulary enrichment is almost limitless in its scope, both in terms of the availability of material and also in terms of the possibilities it opens up in dealing with choice, meaning, and use.

References

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